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Methodological Pluralism in Qualitative Research: Reflections on a Meta-study

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Abstract

A short report is provided of a meta-study of methodological pluralism in qualitative research: i.e. of the use of two or more qualitative methods to analyse the same data set. Ten eligible papers were identified and assessed. Their contents are described with respect to theory, methods and findings, and their possible implications discussed in relation to a series of wider debates in qualitative research more generally.

Introduction

We (the authors) are members of a qualitative research discussion group in a large multi-disciplinary university school. In recent years we have observed what seems to be an increasing trend toward methodological pluralism in qualitative research. After some discussion we decided to further investigate this trend by conducting a meta-study of relevant publications. In this short paper we summarise this meta-study and reflect upon some of the issues it raises.

We begin with some reflections on methodological pluralism itself. As defined within our meta-study, this term refers to the deployment within a single paper of at least two qualitative methods to analyse the same data set. To avoid confusion, though, we must note that for some (e.g. Barker & Pistrang, 2005) this term refers to the methodologically pluralist state of qualitative research per se; that is, to the broad variety of methods and epistemologies that constitute the field as a whole. Moreover, as Chamberlain et al., (2011) observe, there are potentially further complexities; broadly equating pluralism with multiplicity, they note that pluralism might refer to methods, but also - and perhaps simultaneously - to occasions of data gathering, researchers, theories, applications and interpretations.

Nevertheless, our focus here is solely upon the use of multiple qualitative methods to analyse the same data set, a practice that clearly resonates with mixed-methods research (e.g. Todd et al., 2004) and with so-called pragmatic approaches (e.g. Barker & Pistrang, 2005). Arguably, this kind of methodological pluralism does not encounter the same level of epistemological challenge as

mixed-methods research, since its methods and data are consistently qualitative (Johnson et al., 2000). However, as is illustrated both by the (still unresolved) debates regarding epistemology and ontology within social constructionist qualitative research (e.g. Corcoran, 2009; Potter, 2010) and by numerous reflections upon Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (e.g. Chamberlain, 2011; Larkin et al., 2006), this consistency should not lead us to presume that epistemological debate is necessarily neutralised by this approach.

An emphasis on epistemology (and its implied twin, ontology) seems apposite since, in the literature we studied, methodological pluralism is frequently endorsed on epistemological and ontological grounds. Advocates of methodological pluralism propose that it is valuable because it allows analysts to extract as much meaning as possible from a text (Frost, 2009) and can enable multiple possibilities of being to be constructed (Frost et al., 2011; Frost & Nolas, 2011; Honan et al., 2000). From an ontological perspective, Chamberlain et al. (2011) argued that multiple methods are appropriate to a plural and complex world; Frost & Nolas (2011) similarly proposed that contemporary experiences are multi-dimensional and worlds are multi-ontological. Epistemologically, it has been suggested that methodological pluralism is a way of generating complementarity between findings (Frost et al., 2011). Complementarity can be compared with triangulation, which assumes that variation in the findings produced by different methods represents errors associated with them. By contrast, complementarity treats this variation as reflecting different aspects of the phenomena, which get rendered differentially visible through the application of multiple methods. This in turn produces more complex, richer understandings of the topic under investigation.

Less frequently, pluralism is also warranted on other grounds. From the perspective of method, Frost et al. (2011) make the reasonable claim that the limitations of one method might be offset by the strengths of another, whilst Burck (2005) advocates pluralism on the basis that it permits readers to see what different methods can offer. Frost et al., (2010) suggest that this approach promotes a greater understanding of the impact of the researcher's biography, experience and application of technique, potentially enabling a heightened transparency to be brought to the research process. Alternatively, Wickens (2011) argues for pluralism on disciplinary grounds, positing that - in an era where more written texts are being produced than ever before - it is necessary to draw on different disciplines in order to analyse any of them.

Regardless of the many claims made for its benefits, in some quarters methodological pluralism is seen as controversial. These controversies are frequently enmeshed within wider, on-going debates regarding the issue of quality in qualitative research. Discussing pluralism within nursing

research, for example, Johnson et al. (2000) rehearsed some of the competing concerns being voiced. They suggest that opponents of pluralism are frequently concerned with dependability and rigour, the maintenance of acceptable methodological standards, and the existence of an audit trail demonstrating that appropriate procedures have been followed which permits 'confirmability' or confidence in the findings. So despite its claimed benefits, methodological pluralism might also be problematic: but to what extent are these problems realised in the literature, and to what extent are they offset by other benefits and strengths? These were the kind of questions that guided our meta-study of methodological pluralism in qualitative research.

The meta-study

A meta-study is a way of synthesising and integrating the findings of a set of qualitative research studies. We followed the analytic procedure suggested by Paterson et al., (2001) which involves the thematic decomposition, analysis and synthesis of the theories, methods and findings sections of a sample of published papers. Our sample comprised peer-reviewed journal articles where the same data had been analysed using multiple qualitative methods. The papers were identified by a systematic literature search comprising multiple searches of relevant databases and using appropriate terms (such as plural*), supplemented by citation searches within relevant articles and personal queries to two leading authors. Initially this yielded 28 papers; however, after elimination of duplicates and ineligible articles (i.e. those that did not describe the use of at least two methods with the same data set, or were not published in peer-reviewed journals) only 10 of these papers remained. Each of the included studies was read by at least two members of our group, with a template used to note key features and relevant comments. These templates formed the basis of discussions that led to agreed, joint descriptions of each paper. Meta-analyses of theory, methods and findings were then conducted on the basis of these agreed descriptions, referring back to the original papers where necessary.

Meta-theory

In the 10 papers there was relatively little discussion of epistemology or ontology in relation to the combination of multiple analytic techniques. Moreover, where authors aligned to particular paradigms, it was not always clear whether their endorsement was epistemological or ontological in character, an ambiguity which applied both to papers described as constructionist (e.g. Burck, 2005) and as process-oriented (Lyons & Cromby, 2010).

Notwithstanding these issues, three useful directions for future pluralist research were identified. First, Honan et al., (2000) presented an elegant series of analyses which served to “show in high relief the constitutive force of theory within the analysis of qualitative materials” (p.9). Their use of discourse theory, feminist poststructuralism and ethnomethodology clearly illustrated how understandings are always the product of theoretical stances as well as methodological procedures. Second, Simons et al., (2008) also displayed some concern with the inescapable constitutive implications of theory, showing how sequential thematic and then narrative analyses could be made commensurate by explicitly locating both within an over-arching constructionist theory of language. Third, Wickens (2011) used the concept of bricolage (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004) to warrant the mixing of techniques drawn from different qualitative methods in a manner that enabled them to be deployed from a common, critical perspective, and so addressing the problem of incommensurability.

Meta-methods

In its actual practice, methodological pluralism seemingly varies along a number of dimensions. The variety of methods employed included phenomenological analysis, narrative analysis, thematic analysis, discourse analysis, positioning analysis and literary analysis. The number of methods adopted in each study ranged from a minimum of two to a maximum of five. Different combinations of methods were used in different papers, and one study (King et al., 2008) utilised multiple variants of the same (phenomenological) approach. In four studies a single researcher applied multiple analyses to the same data, whereas three papers used at least two researchers to undertake multiple analyses together. Others used a team of researchers to conduct multiple analyses independently (Honan et al., 2000), or independently followed by a group cross-analysis (Frost et al., 2011; King et al., 2008).. Just one paper (Robinson & Smith, 2010) set out a composite approach within which the analyses themselves were thoroughly integrated; all of the others applied the methods separately.

Our meta-analysis of methods also revealed some links back to issues of theory, with epistemological justifications for the choice of methods being given in only three papers. However, choices were also warranted because of their purported ‘fit’ with the data (e.g. Burck, 2005) and because of their claimed suitability to the research question (e.g. Wickens, 2011).

Meta-findings

Unsurprisingly, there was also considerable variation with regard to what methodological pluralism means with respect to research findings. Most obviously, some papers presented

multiple analyses of the same piece of data, whereas others presented multiple analyses of the same data sets but illustrated these using different extracts. There was also variation in the ways in which findings were presented, ranging from individual presentations of each analysis to a fully integrated presentation of multiple interpretations. Whereas some papers offered relatively little in the way of comparisons between their findings, others made more intimate connections between them and, in some cases, employed deliberate strategies of sequencing in order to demonstrate how each method served to reveal a different ‘layer’ of meaning (e.g. Frost, 2009; Simons et al., 2008). By contrast, other papers presented perspectives that compared and contrasted their multiple analyses, sometimes showing how their findings could appear somewhat contradictory (e.g. Honan et al., 2000). Finally, some papers presented integrated syntheses of their findings, using the multiple methods to converge on a ‘consensual’ presentation (King et al., 2008), or to produce “a combined picture [that] provides such a rich and evocative depiction that is more than the sum of its parts” (Wickens, 2011, p. 161).

Notwithstanding this variety, our meta-analysis of findings suggests that methodological pluralism has numerous potential advantages, including the ability to combine methods that privilege structure with those that privilege agency, and the ability to produce richer, more complex, ‘layered’ analyses that avoid ‘fixing’ or ‘finalising’ the experiences of research participants.

Reflections

It seems to us that methodological pluralism in qualitative research crystallises or exemplifies – in particular ways - a series of debates and issues that are relevant to qualitative research more generally.

First, there is the purism-methodolatry debate. Whilst some scholars argue for overall consistency and purity in the application of method – primarily as a guarantee of research quality – others argue that this requirement may distort and limit findings, prevent innovative or creative analyses, and lead procedural requirements to take precedence over sensible adjustments that adapt methods to particular research questions and the specificities of the data (e.g. Reicher, 2000). By definition, methodological pluralists reject purism, yet it does not seem to us that their research is necessarily any better *or* any worse – it is no more and no less insightful, nuanced, sophisticated, rigorous, grounded in the data, and potentially generative of further lines of enquiry or of application – than research which confines itself to a single method. This

conclusion might appear to be simultaneously both supportive of pluralism (since its supposed flaws, limitations and contradictions mostly do not seem to have been realised in practice) and at the same time critical of pluralism (since most of its benefits and advantages do not seem to have been realised, either).

Perhaps no-one should be surprised by this, however, since the purism against which pluralism is being compared is arguably more of an ideal than an actuality. As Johnson et al. (2000) observe, it is already difficult (at least in their field, nursing studies) to identify wholly consistent applications of either phenomenological, grounded theory or ethnographic research. The ways in which these methods get applied are already somewhat variable, differing somewhat from one study to another. And likewise in psychology, it seems possible to suggest that there is also similar diversity with respect to various methods, including discourse analysis and IPA. So if there are in practice already multiple subtle variants of each method at play, purism is more of a rhetorical gesture than a concrete actuality. Given this, we should not expect the contrasting effects of pluralism to necessarily be either positive *or* negative.

This would suggest that it in fact it is the quality of individual studies with which we should be primarily concerned, and this issue of quality is the second more general debate that pluralism encounters. Indeed, debates about quality might be seen as more relevant than debates about purism, since what is at stake in methodological pluralism is not mere variation between studies but the simultaneous application of multiple methods (or elements thereof) within single studies. As has been noted, there are numerous competing guidelines that promise ways of ensuring or assessing quality in qualitative research – a pluralism of quality criteria (amongst various others, see for example Elliott et al., 1999; Seale, 1999; Stiles, 1993; Tracy, 2010). Whilst there was relatively little explicit orientation to such criteria in the papers we analysed, there were some very good analyses, and some of these contained potentially transferable strategies to enhance rigour. The notion of explicit sequencing of multiple methods is one example of such a strategy (Simons et al., 2008), as is Wickens (2011) use of a ‘triple entry journal’ to facilitate recording of analytic comments and their transfer across methodological frames. Whilst the papers we analysed varied with respect to the extent to which their methodological procedures were transparent and set out in sufficient detail to enable replication or audit, this variation did not strike us as fundamentally problematic, nor as necessarily being any greater than that which can frequently be seen in mono-methodological studies.

The third more general issue concerns the attention given to discussions of the relationships between epistemology, ontology and method. Overall, relatively little space was devoted to these

paradigmatic issues in the papers we analysed; the emphasis was primarily on findings, with comparatively little attention paid to the deep assumptions underpinning the methods that produced them. In this regard, of course, pluralism appeared no different from many mono-methodological studies. However, this brevity is potentially more troublesome here since the simultaneous deployment of multiple methods, some of which may make different assumptions (about valid knowledge, or about the world being studied), generates potentials for incoherence that more conventional studies do not.

In this context some explicit (if necessarily brief) discussion of the commensurability of the paradigms endorsed and the methods deployed would help bolster methodological pluralism against potential criticisms of incoherence. Indeed, and as we have noted, some of the papers we analysed already suggest strategies to facilitate this. That said, we recognise that a single journal paper cannot possibly report every aspect of a study, and that the genre requirement to both explain how strategies of methodological pluralism were enacted *and* then to summarise multiple sets of findings will inevitably restrict the space available for discussion of paradigmatic issues. This consideration, then, leads to the additional suggestion that the material economy of journal production might ultimately be a barrier to the more widespread adoption of methodological pluralism.

A fourth issue raised by our meta-study of methodological pluralism concerns reflexivity and what we will call the ‘multiplicity gesture’. By this, we mean the trope that appears within many qualitative studies where analytic quality is warranted, at least in part, with respect to the extent to which the analysis represents or captures the apparent multiplicity of interpretations, voices or themes ‘within’ the data. The multiplicity gesture is intimately linked to reflexivity, since analysts must necessarily reflect upon and de-centre their own perspectives in order to adequately grasp or perceive their participants’ multiplicities. Nevertheless, as Johnson et al. (2000) observe, this kind of reflexivity is not always enough. They suggest that whilst acknowledgement of the researchers’ investment in or experience of the topic of the study is a necessary beginning, what is often needed is a more profound interrogation within which not only the researchers’ personal investments but also “the social and intellectual unconscious embedded in the analytic tools and operations” (p.248) can be assessed for their potential contribution to the findings. In seeking to produce multiple interpretations of participants’ lives, some papers in our meta-study engaged directly and explicitly with the variable capacities and assumptions that the research process enacts, including those of the researcher (Frost et al., 2010) as well as wider societal forces (Wickens, 2011). Thus it seems that methodological pluralism (like the notion of bricolage, with

which some scholars in our study associate it) has considerable potential to realise deeper forms of reflexivity that encompass analytic tools and methodological procedures as well as researcher proclivities, and that this is one of its strengths.

Conclusion

The simultaneous application of more than one qualitative analytical technique presents challenges for researchers who wish to explicate more nuanced and sometimes diverging meanings from the same data set. Pluralistic researchers must find ways to demonstrate coherent links between theory, method and findings, and explain how findings produced from multiple analyses can remain commensurate. Equally, methodological pluralism offers considerable potential to enable researchers to produce more complex, multi-layered understandings of participants' lives, and to provide alternative and interesting ways of approaching research questions in social science and psychology. Like related approaches (e.g. bricolage) it may encourage researchers to flexibly adapt methods to their own questions and data, rather than being defensively led by procedure. The papers we reviewed begin to illustrate these possibilities whilst also highlighting some areas of potential concern should this trend towards pluralism continue. Overall, we conclude that methodological pluralism is a welcome addition to the diverse options available to qualitative researchers.

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